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THE NEGRO ENUMERATION OF 1920

A REPLY TO DR. KELLY MILLER

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IN an article entitled "Enumeration Errors in Negro Population," published in the February, 1922, issue of *THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY*, Dr. Kelly Miller asserts that the 1920 enumeration of Negroes was seriously defective, basing his assertion mainly on the fact that the rate of increase shown for the Negro population between 1910 and 1920 was less than might have been expected under normal conditions. With this utterly inadequate basis for his claims, and presumably without giving any study to data as to Negro age distribution, he declares that the enumeration of 1920, like those of 1870 and 1890, was "so flagrantly discrepant as to demand special explanation and correction." (Page 169.) Disregarding the reduction in the Negro birth rate due to the abnormal conditions prevailing during the last decade, and making no allowance for the excessive mortality due to the influenza epidemic, he estimates that the true rate of increase in the Negro population between 1910 and 1920 was 9.6 per cent., a rate which would be substantially in line with those for preceding decades. In order to obtain this normal-appearing rate of increase, he adds 300,000 to the number of Negroes enumerated in 1920, asserting that the estimated total thus obtained "makes the Negro population behave more or less normally"—despite the fact that conditions were far from normal during the last decade. (Page 176.)

As a matter of fact, a careful examination of all—not merely a part—of the available data which are sufficiently reliable to be worthy of consideration demonstrates the substantial completeness of the Negro enumeration in 1920. The evidence supplied by the census figures themselves is so convincing that there is really little need to consider collateral data. Nevertheless, the birth and death statistics for the Negroes in those states which maintain adequate registration systems have been carefully examined and have been found to be in harmony with the decennial census figures.

It was a well-known and unquestioned fact before the census was taken that there had been, during the latter half of the last decade, an unusual and very considerable migration of Negroes from the South to the North and West. The census confirmed that

fact and showed that the migration during the entire decade had amounted to about 400,000. Such a movement would naturally have a tendency to break up the home life and family relationships and result in a reduced birth rate. That this was the case is brought out clearly by an examination of the following figures for Negro children under 10 years of age:

AGE GROUP	1920	1910	Increase (+) or Decrease (—)	
			Number	Per cent.
Total under 10 years.....	2,409,906	2,509,841	—99,935	—4.0
5-9 years.....	1,266,207	1,246,553	+19,654	+1.6
Under 5 years	1,143,699	1,263,288	—119,589	—9.5

There is nothing inexplicable about this condition. The departure of hundreds of thousands of Negroes, most of whom were undoubtedly in the younger adult ages, from the South brought about a material reduction in the number of Negro births in that section; but the presence of these migrants in the North and West did not result in any counterbalancing increase in Negro births. The Negro birth rate is much lower in the North and West than in the South, and in some states it falls below the Negro death rate. In 1920, of the 18 northern and western states in the birth-registration area, only four showed natural increases due to excess of births over deaths among the Negro population, the rates of such increase ranging from 1.4 per 1,000 Negro population for Pennsylvania to 5.2 for Massachusetts. The remaining 14 northern and western states showed natural decreases in their Negro population due to excess of deaths over births, ranging from six tenths of 1 per 1,000 for Ohio to 19.1 for Maine. The birth-registration area also includes five southern states and the District of Columbia. Of these, the District and four states show the following rates of natural increase in Negro population for 1920: District of Columbia, 1.9 per 1,000; Maryland, 6.4; South Carolina, 11; Virginia, 12.1; North Carolina, 15.1. The figures for Kentucky indicate a natural decrease of 1.8 per 1,000.

In order, therefore, to test the completeness of the 1920 census figures for the Negro population by comparing them with the results of preceding censuses, it is necessary to make the comparisons between the number of Negroes 10 years of age and over enumerated at each census and the total number enumerated at the preceding census. In this way the births during the decade are eliminated from consideration, and the mortality among the Negro population enumerated at the beginning of the decade is ascertained. The following table shows, for each census year from 1850 to 1920, the total

Negro population and the Negro population 10 years of age and over, as enumerated, together with the percentage by which the number at the ages of 10 and over fell below the total number enumerated at the preceding census:

TABLE 1

TOTAL NEGRO POPULATION AND NEGRO POPULATION 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER, WITH PERCENTAGE BY WHICH NUMBER 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER FELL BELOW TOTAL NUMBER AT PRECEDING CENSUS: 1850-1920

CENSUS YEAR	Total negro population	Negro population 10 years of age and over	Per cent. by which number 10 years of age and over fell below total at preceding census
1920	10,463,131	8,053,225	18.1
1910	9,827,763	7,317,922	17.2
1900	8,833,994	6,415,581	14.3
1890	7,488,676	5,328,972	19.0
1880	6,580,793	4,472,373	8.4
1870	4,880,009	3,428,757	22.8
1860	4,441,830	3,084,940	15.2
1850	3,638,808	2,500,353	

The following table gives adjusted figures for 1870 and 1890. The revised total for 1870 in the first column has been published heretofore in the decennial census reports. The revised total for 1890 in the first column is given on page 28 of the Bureau's special report, "Negro Population in the United States: 1790-1915." The revised figures for 1870 and 1890 in the second column have been

TABLE 2

TOTAL NEGRO POPULATION AND NEGRO POPULATION 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER, AS ESTIMATED FOR 1870 AND 1890 AND AS ENUMERATED IN OTHER CENSUS YEARS, WITH PERCENTAGE BY WHICH NUMBER 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER AT EACH CENSUS FELL BELOW TOTAL NUMBER AT PRECEDING CENSUS: 1850-1920

CENSUS YEAR	Total negro population	Negro population 10 years of age and over	Per cent. by which number 10 years of age and over fell below total at preceding census
1920	10,463,131	8,053,225	17.4*
1910	9,827,763	7,317,922	17.2
1900	8,833,994	6,415,581	17.3
1890	7,760,000	5,525,000	16.0
1880	6,580,793	4,472,373	17.1
1870	5,392,172	3,790,697	14.7
1860	4,441,830	3,084,940	15.2
1850	3,638,808	2,500,353	

*Adjusted to exclude mortality due to influenza epidemic.

calculated on the assumption that the age distribution at the two censuses in question was the same for the Negroes omitted as for those enumerated. The revised rate for 1910-1920 in the third column has been calculated by deducting the estimated mortality due to the influenza epidemic in 1918 and 1919 (60,000) from the total decrease. The revised rate, therefore, represents the normal mortality during the decade among the Negroes enumerated in 1910.

In preparing the foregoing tables no adjustment has been made on account of the change in the census date from June 1 in 1900 to April 15 in 1910 and to January 1 in 1920, and the effect of immigration has also been disregarded. The numbers of Negro children who reached the age of 10 between April 15 and June 1, 1910, and between January 1 and April 15, 1920, were undoubtedly somewhat larger than the numbers of deaths of Negroes 10 years of age and over during the same periods. On the other hand, the number of Negroes 10 years of age and over as enumerated at each census would be reduced by the exclusion of the immigrants who arrived during the preceding decade. As it would be impossible to calculate accurately the slight effect of either of these opposing factors, they have both been disregarded; but the resultant error is too slight to have any significance as affecting the comparability of the percentages for the several decades.

The rates in Table 1 show conclusively that the 1870 returns were far from complete, and indicate that the 1890 returns were also incomplete, although not to so great an extent as those of 1870; but, as will be seen from the revised rates in Table 2, the decrease due to normal mortality in the Negro population enumerated in 1910, as shown by the census returns for 1920, was in entire harmony with the corresponding decreases during preceding decades.

It may be mentioned in passing that the mortality during the last decade among the Negro population enumerated in 1910, as indicated by the percentage in Table 1, is no more than might be expected from an examination of the mortality rates for the colored population (Negroes, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and other non-whites) of the death-registration area, which—excluding the abnormal year 1918—ranged from a maximum of 23.4 per 1,000 colored population in 1911 to a minimum of 18 in 1920. For 1918 the rate was 26 per 1,000. These rates do not show at all definitely the total colored mortality, since the death-registration area contains only a part of the colored population, but they do indicate that the Negro mortality during the decade was fully as great as that shown by the decennial census figures.

Thus the census returns for Negroes 10 years of age and over in 1920 not only afford no ground whatever for an assumption that the enumeration was deficient, but in large measure demonstrate

their own substantial accuracy, and therefore, in the entire absence of any credible evidence to the contrary, must be accepted. Hence if the charge that the enumeration of the Negro population as a whole was deficient is to be sustained it must be accompanied by proof of an incomplete enumeration of children under 10. No such proof has been offered. Moreover, as has already been pointed out, the unprecedented northward migration of Negroes between 1910 and 1920 resulted in a marked decline in the birth rate, and the census figures show only what might have been expected in this respect. Furthermore, it would be idle to claim that the census takers, while successful in enumerating the parents and older children, were guilty of overlooking scores or hundreds of thousands of the younger children. Such an assumption is unworthy of serious consideration. The most difficult part of the population to enumerate is made up of the roving or "floating" element, which consists mainly of unattached adults—or, at any rate, of adults separated from their families; but the enumeration of children presents no special difficulties.

In order to forestall further allegations of underenumeration based on obvious discrepancies in the statistics for certain age groups, it may be added that these have been carefully considered and are found to have no material effect on the accuracy of the returns for the total number of Negroes aged 10 and over or the total number at all ages. The number of Negro men reported as between the ages of 20 and 35 was probably too small, but the number reported as between the ages of 45 and 55 was probably too large. The obvious explanation of this condition is that there was a general overstatement of the ages of Negro men whose true ages were between 20 and 50, but the total number of men under 55, as enumerated in 1920, is not unduly small. The Negro population of both sexes in the age group 20 to 54 formed 47.3 per cent. of the total Negro population of all ages in 1920, as against 44.6 per cent. in 1910 and 41.8 per cent. in 1900. It is clear, therefore, that there was no serious underenumeration of young or middle-aged Negro men, but merely an overstatement of their ages.

Another test of the accuracy of the 1920 returns is found by comparing the sex distribution of the Negro population as shown by the last three censuses. The males outnumber the females among the Negro population of every northern and western state except New York and New Jersey; and the roving or floating element, which is by far the most difficult to enumerate, is made up mainly of males. If, therefore, there had been any considerable number of omissions in enumerating this element in 1920, the result would have been a decrease in the indicated ratio of males to females as compared with 1910 and 1900. On the contrary, however,

the returns show increases in this respect both for the total Negro population and for the Negro population 10 years of age and over, as will be seen from the following statement:

EXCESS OF FEMALES OVER MALES AND SEX RATIO IN NEGRO POPULATION:
1920, 1910 AND 1900

AGE LIMIT	Excess of females over males			Males to 100 females		
	1920	1910	1900	1920	1910	1900
All ages.....	44,259	56,001	60,900	99.2	98.9	98.6
Ten years and over....	34,301	43,150	53,784	99.2	98.8	98.3

These figures alone supply fairly conclusive evidence that there were no wholesale omissions in enumerating the migrant Negroes in the North and West.

Dr. Miller's assertion that "The internal evidence of error is overwhelming" (page 170) may therefore be reversed in meaning; for the internal evidence, when considered in all its phases, certainly sustains the substantial accuracy of the enumeration. Nevertheless, in order to make assurance doubly sure, the results of the enumeration in every county in the southern states in 1920 were scrutinized in comparison with the figures for 1910 and 1900, and a careful examination of the original returns was made for the few counties which showed decreases that appeared suspiciously large as against the increases or decreases during the preceding decade; but in no case was anything found to indicate that the enumerators had neglected to canvass the Negro population generally, or any considerable part of it.

Dr. Miller asserts that—

" An acknowledged error of a half million [referring to the census of 1870], it would seem, would put this bureau on the lookout for similar errors in the future." (Page 170.)

And again:

" As this bureau has admittedly committed grave errors in enumeration of the negro population in two preceding censuses, it is but reasonable that the obvious discrepancy can be most reasonably accounted for by an error in the present count." (Page 172.)

The present Bureau of the Census is in no way responsible for the errors of 1870 and 1890. The Census Office has been in continuous existence since July 1, 1899, and has been existence as a permanent office, under substantially its present organization, since July 1, 1902. Not one person connected with the census of 1870 is now in the service of the Bureau, and only a very few of the officials and employees of 1890 are in the present office.

Dr. Miller points out that the World War greatly upset the mobile Negro population, and continues:

" . . . There was a mad rush of negroes from the South to fill the vacuum in the labor market caused by unsettled conditions. Thousands of negro homes were broken up and their members scattered without definite residential identity." (Page 172.)

He is thus fully aware of the Negro exodus from the South, but is willing to consider it only in connection with the difficulties in the way of enumerating the migrant Negroes in their northern abodes, disregarding entirely the pronounced decrease in the Negro birth rate which resulted from this unusual migratory movement. He continues:

"In the cities especially, it seems probable that the count was greatly underestimated. The negro migrants lived for the most part in improvised lodgings and boarding houses whose proprietors had little knowledge and less interest in the identity of the boarders. The census official, visiting such boarding houses with a large number of negro boarders would, in all probability, receive an inaccurate underestimate by the ignorant and uncaring proprietors." (Page 172.)

The proprietors of lodging houses were required to do far more than make an estimate of the number of their lodgers. They were required to give the name and as many as possible of about 15 items of information in regard to each lodger whom the enumerator was unable to interview personally. Moreover, it would be an exceedingly unbusinesslike lodging-house keeper who would not at least know how many lodgers he had.

Dr. Miller quotes from an editorial in the Oklahoma City Dispatch, in which it was asserted that 33 Negroes had been overlooked in one block. During the enumeration many similar charges were made by newspapers, chambers of commerce, and other organizations, and some of them were couched in violent and abusive language. These charges were duly investigated and in most cases were found to rest upon very slight foundation or no foundation at all. A newspaper in a certain city having a population of approximately 15,000 asserted that the city had been underenumerated by about 10 per cent. In reply the Bureau offered to recanvass the entire city for the purpose of verifying or correcting the original enumeration if the editor could prove that in some part of the city, to be selected by himself, the enumeration had been deficient to the extent of 2 per cent. The editor then brought the matter to the attention of the local commercial club, which, after investigation, expressed in writing its satisfaction with the enumeration and its belief that the work had been properly performed.

In another city, whose population was approximately 23,000, complaints were made that the enumeration was "so absurd that it amounts to nothing short of an insult," that it was "absolutely ridiculous," and that the alleged errors were due to "gross incompetency of enumerators." The Bureau requested the complain-

ants to supply proof in the form of names and addresses of persons omitted. They organized a canvass of a part of the city, secured 1,239 names of persons purporting to have been bona fide residents and to have been missed by the enumerators, and sent these names to the Bureau; but from this number it was possible, through careful and painstaking investigation, to sift out only 91 names of persons who were actually entitled to enumeration and had been missed.

From these examples it is obvious that little credence is to be placed in a mere newspaper statement that the enumeration was incomplete. It is easy to assert emphatically that a city or town has a far greater population than the census returns show, and there is little difficulty in producing persons who will declare themselves to have been missed by the enumerators. But when a thorough investigation is made it is found in the great majority of cases either that the persons were enumerated without knowing it, the information regarding them having been supplied by others, or that they were not entitled to enumeration as bona fide residents of the city or town in question.

One instance of miscalculation on Dr. Miller's part is worthy of special mention, not because it has any direct bearing on his claim of underenumeration of the Negro population, but because it illustrates forcibly the lack of care and occasional disregard of mathematics displayed in the preparation of his article:

"Even the apparent rapid increase in the white death rate awaits fuller explanation before the figures can be relied upon with assurance. It is curious to note that the birth rate among the whites in South Carolina fell from 32.3 in 1900 to 27.1 in 1919, the death rate rising but slightly from 10.4 to 10.6 during the same interval. And yet the white population of that state increased from 557,807 in 1900 to 818,538 in 1920. There was a vigesimal increment of 250,731 with little or no reinforcement from immigration. This unexplained increment in the white population seems also to discredit the reliability of the recorded mortality statistics within the states so recently added to the registration area." (Page 174.)

There has been no rapid increase in the white death rate. For the death-registration area as a whole (which has been increasing in extent from time to time) the death rate for the white population decreased from 17.1 per 1,000 in 1900 to 12.6 in 1920, and during the entire period there was no pronounced increase from one year to another, except in the case of the rate for 1918, 17.4 per 1,000, which, because of the influenza epidemic, was considerably higher than that for the preceding year, 13.7.

The increase in the white population of South Carolina is in no way inconsistent with the birth and death rates cited by Dr. Miller. In fact, although the death rate for 1900 is probably open to question (the state was not then in the death-registration area), it hap-

pens that the figures harmonize very closely indeed. The rate of natural increase due to excess of births over deaths in 1900, according to the figures, would be 21.9 per 1,000 white population, and the corresponding rate for 1919 would be 16.5. Assuming that the annual rate of natural increase in the white population decreased from 21.9 per 1,000 in 1900 to 16.5 in 1919, the decrease in the rate of increase being uniform throughout the period, the vicennial increase would be approximately 257,000, or only about 4,000 less than the increase of 260,731 shown by the census figures (not 250,731, as stated by Dr. Miller).

To summarize:

Dr. Miller's claims are based mainly on the fact that the increase shown by the Negro population during the last decade was abnormally small. He assumes that the true increase must have been a normal one, despite the fact that the conditions during the decade were abnormal.

The census figures themselves show that the number of Negroes 10 years of age and over enumerated in 1920 bears an entirely normal relation to the total number of Negroes enumerated in 1910. Furthermore, the mortality during the decade among the Negroes enumerated in 1910, as shown by the census returns, is scarcely as great as that indicated by the mortality statistics for the colored population of the death-registration area.

The returns show that the number of Negro children under 10 years of age, and especially the number under 5 years of age, as enumerated in 1920 were abnormally small. This condition was a natural result of the unprecedented Negro migration from the South to the North and West during the decade. Moreover, since the census takers were obviously successful in enumerating all or substantially all the adults and older children, there is no possibility that they overlooked a very large number of children under 10.

The ratio of males to females in the total Negro population and in the Negro population 10 years of age and over in 1920 was higher than in 1910 or 1900, the increase from census to census being substantially uniform. Thus there could have been no wholesale omissions in enumerating the migrant Negroes in the North or West, among whom the males far outnumber the females.

For the foregoing reasons the writer, after a thorough study not only of the census returns but of such available collateral data as have any bearing on the matter, is of the opinion that the enumeration of Negroes was probably as nearly complete in 1920 as in 1910 or 1900, and finds no ground whatever for attacking the 1920 census as inaccurate beyond the small margin of error which is inherent in any great statistical undertaking.